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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Let the feasting begin! Yes, Thanksgiving may be over, but the best part of the holiday - the leftovers - has just begun! As I've stated in the past many times, I really enjoy the "aftermath" of our holiday meal! Not just the turkey, but everything else that was part of our meal. It's a once-a-year celebration; and I try to enjoy it for as long as I can. Hopefully, you and yours also had an enjoyable holiday celebration!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor !
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World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor Can t Teach An Old Orc New Tricks

The quest for question marks continues.

If you ve played World of Warcraft, you know what I m talking about. As you wander through the game, you find characters with exclamation points hovering over their heads, dispensing quests that, when completed, turn

the exclamation points into question marks. The yellow ? is one of the stars WoW players steer by, promising a brief dopamine rush as each quest is turned in for some quantity of gold and experience points and, if you re lucky, a Cool Item to equip.

Alongside the Quest for Question Marks is the Battle of the Hotbar. That s the one where, in the midst of fierce combat, you stare at the bottom eighth of your screen, a bar crammed with buttons representing your character s skills, attacks, and spells. Occasionally you ll look at the meticulously animated monster you re fighting, but that s only when your abilities are on cooldown (i.e., unavailable).

I should interject here that I adore World of Warcraft. It s one of my three favorite games of all time, and for me all time stretches back to about 1977. So, as a feral druid named Powhatan, I willingly Shredded and Ripped and Ferociously Bit my way through all the quests and enemies in the newly released Warlords of Draenor expansion. But it all felt a bit dated clunky, even. At its core this is a game from 2004, reflecting the state of the massively multipayer genre at that time. Despite the fresh coat of paint, it s still that game.

As with every expansion, there s a sizeable chunk of WoW players for whom the purchase of Warlords of Draenor is a foregone conclusion: They ll buy it, play the heck out of it, and complain about the things they dislike. But if you ve been out of Azeroth for a while, is there enough here to bring you back?

Kinda.

If you enjoy the core gameplay of WoW and its expansions, you ll get plenty of it here: 10 new levels (to a cap of 100), seven new zones (not counting the as-yet-unlocked Tanaan Jungle), hundreds of quests, and eight new dungeons. If you re expecting something fresh, though, you may be disappointed. You ve been here, and you ve done this.

The storyline propels your character into an alternate version of Draenor, the Orc homeworld. WoW players last saw Draenor or what was left of it in the 2006 expansion The Burning Crusade, where it was blasted into fragments and renamed Outland. In the new parallel timeline, though, the old Draenor is still intact, and populated with legendary Warcraft heroes such as Gul dan, Durotan, and Archmage Khadgar. You ll fight alongside (or against) them as you unfold a complicated storyline involving the Iron Horde, a united orc army that threatens to sweep over Draenor and beyond.

To be honest, it s hard to get too excited by the plot. For all of Blizzard s deservedly great reputation for making quality cinematics, they re not the best storytellers around. The narratives in WoW have always worked best when viewed peripherally, as a colorful backdrop to all that button-mashing and quest-gobbling.

And the visuals here, as always, are excellent, from the newly updated models to the gorgeous backdrops featuring enormous mushrooms, windswept tundras, and fecund jungles. This is a Technicolor fantasy world drawn with dreamlike vividness. Subtlety isn t in the playbook. Thumbs up, also, to the score by Russell Brower, which at times catches you off-guard with moments of beauty that make you want to stop playing and just listen.

Many of the previous expansions refinements are still here, for better

and for worse. The streamlined talent system from 2012 s Mists of Pandaria is present, and it feels too cookie-cutter in the character customization it offers. The dungeon-finder tool lets you find a party in a matter of minutes, but your new buddies will rush through content like they ve double-parked their kodos outside. You might as well be playing with bots.

The big new gameplay gambit is your character s ability to build a stronghold on Draenor. Through rudimentary command table and drafting board interfaces that self-consciously echo the Warcraft series of real-time strategy games, you ll be able to place buildings in your base, upgrade them, and send recruited heroes on various quests to acquire resources and gold. (These missions, mind you, take place offscreen you wait around for hours and then are told of the result.)

It s one of the bigger changes we ve yet seen to core gameplay, and there s a strong novelty factor. Waiting for missions to complete adds yet another hook to get you logging back in, but the whole time-elapse mechanism is eerily reminiscent of penny-pinching free-to-play titles, and you wonder whether Blizzard is planning to introduce some reasonably priced speed boosts down the line.

A problem with the Garrison system is that you don t have enough control over what goes on in your base. The buildup process is painfully slow at first. The follower missions aren t playable, and there s a very limited number of spaces in which to place your garrison s buildings. And the game isn t great at teaching you how it all works where to get plans for new buildings, how one type of plan differs from another, and what the benefits of each building are. The confusion engenders hesitancy, and it s deflating that when your character is nearing Level 100, her stronghold is still a pretty rudimentary affair.

Perhaps in the endgame, a fully unlocked garrison allows a genuinely deep and rewarding experience. But it s hard to get too excited about something that barely shows its potential in the first 25 hours of gameplay.

Quest design is a mixed bag. A few are inspired, such as one involving the Raven hero Terokk, in which you explore ancient myths by reliving them through Terokk s eyes. There are also some nice setpiece battles that flow seamlessly into cutscenes to advance the main storyline. But most zones dole out the usual mix of quests: Go find X of some object and click on them while also killing Y creatures that happen to be wandering in that area. Granted, it would take almost superhuman skill to come up with hundreds of equally fresh, entertaining quests.

Draenor also includes a dedicated new player-vs.-player zone called Ashran, which features a never-ending battle between Horde and Alliance. So far it s a disappointment: Population imbalances on many realms make it practically unplayable for one side or another, and cross-realm instancing, which might fix this, has yet to be implemented. In time, it might work well enough, but for now it feels a little broken.

The deeper issue with Warlords of Draenor is that this is a 10-year-old game with 10-year-old gameplay, albeit dressed up with better graphics and a smoother interface. It s just not as engaging as it used to be. For those with a deep investment in the game particularly a social one most of Draenor s level 90-100 content is just a brief rite of passage before the months-long endgame of PvP and/or raiding. For the rest of us, it s a bittersweet experience, evoking old pleasures, delivering the

reliable Blizzard polish that s easy to take for granted, yet reminding us that maybe there s a reason we ve moved on.

Sony Refunding Customers $50 for Misleading Ads, FTC Orders

Sony is finally making good on something that many customers found outrageous for a long period of time, before the settlement finally came around. The allegations against the company suggest that they misled customers leading up to, and around the time of the launch of the PlayStation Vita handheld console. Now though, Sony won t be fighting those claims any longer and will be offering a $25 refund or a $50 voucher, according to the FTC.

The misleading portion of the advertising stemmed from the fact that Sony claimed things that ultimately were not possible. The major mark against the company was the fact that they repeatedly laid claim to the notion that players would be able to move from playing on the PlayStation 3 and then to the Vita. In the process, the claim was that they would not lose any progress in the game and that they would be able to move directly from console-to-console. Another misleading claim was that Sony said those who bought the 3G version would be able to play in a multiplayer mode, but at the end of the day that just wasn t the case.

The advertising company that worked with Sony on the PS Vita, or Deutsch LA as its known, also pushed its employees to promote the PlayStation Vita, and ultimately praise the device, but to do so without actually letting their Twitter followers know that they had affiliation with the company, and ultimately PlayStation as wellJessica Rich the director of the FTC s Bureau of Consumer Protection, noted in a statement that As we enter the year s biggest shopping period, companies need to be reminded that if they make product promises to consumers as Sony did with the game changing features of its PS Vita they must deliver on those pledges.

She went on to note that The FTC will not hesitate to act on behalf of consumers when companies or advertisers make false product claims. Sony is just the first of potentially many companies that will be facing a more strict, and fierce fight against them to ensure that proper procedures are carried out and a respectable advertising campaign is waged at all times from these large companies.

Recently, a federal judge approved Apple s payment to customers related to charges that claimed the company had violated several antitrust laws and allowed the company to work with publishers specifically to raise prices. This was something that gained a lot of criticism, and something that shows the trend that has been occurring throughout the recent months. Sony though has been going through some interesting problems of their own recently as Sony Pictures was forced to shut down computers and reevaluate their security situation as data was literally held at ransom by a group that called themselves #GOP.

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Atari Announces Haunted House: Cryptic Graves Now Available on Steam

Atari, one of the world s most recognized publishers and producers of interactive entertainment, announced that Haunted House: Cryptic Graves is now available for download on Steam. Inspired by the original 1982 classic Atari hit Haunted House , known as one of the industry s first survival horror games, Haunted House: Cryptic Graves is a re-imagined version offering players a first-person, adventure-horror experience. Filled with cryptic puzzles, supernatural entities, and paranormal activity, Haunted House: Cryptic Graves is available for download on Steam for $19.99 (http://store.steampowered.com/app/314850). For a glimpse of what mysteries lie ahead, watch the gameplay trailer at www.hauntedhousegame.com.

In Haunted House: Cryptic Graves , gamers are gifted with supernatural powers to purge the spirits and monsters that haunt the abandoned estate of Abaddon Grange, while solving mysteries to help the Ghost avenge his murder and release his spirit from the house. As players make their way through the enigmatic, haunted estate in the role of Anya Graves, heir to the estate, their gameplay experience will include:

Communication with the dead by using their character s special powers, including the ability to touch objects to glean information about their previous owner.

Exploration of mysterious rooms and corridors throughout the haunted mansion, including the catacombs, garden maze and laboratories, slowly uncovering the truth about the estate s haunted history.

Crafting powerful potions using the four elements of Alchemy Fire, Air, Water and Earth that unlock the ability to explore different passageways and gain protection from deadly apparitions.

Evasion of horrid ghosts and enemies that possess supernatural abilities, including the Silent Stalkers, Jack the Ripper and Witch.

Gordon Rennie, an award-winning comic book and videogames writer, and the scriptwriter of Killzone, wrote the re-imagined Haunted House: Cryptic Graves. The game was developed by Dreampainters, the seasoned team behind the critically acclaimed survival-horror game, Anna.

For the latest Haunted House: Cryptic Graves news updates and gameplay releases, follow @ HauntedHousePC on Twitter or like https://www.facebook.com/atarihauntedhouse on Facebook.

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Unidentified Country Likely Behind Spying Software

Cyber-security researchers say they've identified a highly sophisticated computer hacking program that appears to have been used by an as-yet unidentified government to spy on banks, telecommunications companies, official agencies and other organizations around the world.

The malicious software known as "Regin" is designed to collect data from its targets for periods of months or years, penetrating deep into computer networks while covering its tracks to avoid detection, according to analysts at Symantec, the Silicon Valley security firm that disclosed the program's existence in a report this week.

Citing factors including its complexity and the likelihood it took years to develop, Symantec security manager Vikram Thakur said Monday, "we think it could not have come from anybody except an extremely well-funded, organized nation state."

Unlike malware that's been used to hack into retailers' payment-processing systems, the Regin program isn't focused on collecting large volumes of credit card numbers or other financial account information, he added. Instead, it's more precisely targeted and can be used to collect screenshots, copy deleted files, steal passwords and monitor digital communications including mobile phone calls.

Evidence from contaminated computers shows the malware has been used since at least 2008, with half the known cases discovered in Russia and Saudi Arabia, Symantec said. Based on its design and behavior, experts at Symantec and other firms said they don't believe it was developed in Russia or China, two countries that are often blamed for cyberattacks around the world.

Reports on two online news sites, Wired.com and The Intercept, cited circumstantial links to suggest the program was used in European cyberattacks that the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden has blamed on U.S. and British intelligence agencies. Without drawing that conclusion, researchers at Symantec Corp. and other firms said Regin's design was reminiscent of a sophisticated program known as Stuxnet, which The New York Times and The Washington Post have reported was developed by U.S. and Israeli agencies.

When asked about the reports, a spokeswoman for the NSA told The Associated Press, "We are not going to comment on speculation."

Other experts cautioned that it's difficult to trace the source of malware.

"It isn't hard to make a piece of malware look like it came from anywhere in the world," said Adam Kujawa of the security firm Malwarebytes Labs.

Regardless of the source, Symantec researchers called the design of the Regin program "groundbreaking and almost peerless." Thakur said the company has been studying the malware since last year.

Another security firm, Kaspersky Labs, reported Monday that it began

tracking the program in 2012. In its own report, Kaspersky said the program showed "mind-blowing" sophistication by penetrating several different computer networks in an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Rather than communicate with each target, the malware was able to avoid detection by using one network to relay commands to another. Kaspersky said it found evidence of Regin contamination in 14 different countries, including the Pacific island nations of Fiji and Kiribati.

An early version of the software was used to infect computers between 2008 and 2011, but it was then shut down and much of the code was removed remotely apparently by its operators, Thakur said. A second version began appearing last year. Kaspersky researchers said they believe the program is still in active use.

Analysts say it’s unclear how the program entered the targeted computers, although Symantec said it found one example where it was introduced through a message sent on Yahoo’s Instant Messenger service.

UK, US Behind Regin Malware, Attacked European Union Networks

Blame the British and American spy agencies for the latest state-sponsored malware attack, say reporters at The Intercept.

The publication, which in the wake of Glenn Greenwald’s departure from The Guardian continued to publish documents leaked by Edward Snowden, said on Monday the recently discovered malware, known as Regin, was used against targets in the European Union.

One of those targets included Belgian telecommunications company Belgacom, which had its networks broken into by the British spy agency the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

Regin was first publicly talked about over the weekend after Symantec discovered the "sophisticated" malware, though is understood to have been in circulation since 2008.

Compared to Stuxnet, the state-sponsored malware whose creators have never been confirmed, the recently-discovered trojan steals data from machines and networks it infects, disguised as Microsoft software.

Some began to point the finger at Russia and China, but these were quickly discounted by industry experts. Others suspected the U.S. and Israel a deal already exists that allows the Middle Eastern allied state to access raw and "unchecked" U.S. collected intelligence.

They weren’t far off. According to Monday’s report, the U.S. working in conjunction with Britain, a European member state (though perhaps not for much longer) attacked Belgacom using the Regin malware.

Though the Belgacom hack was disclosed by Snowden’s leaks, the malware used had never been revealed.

The new details from The Intercept show how GCHQ embarked upon its "hacking mission," known as Operation Socialist, by accessing Belgacom’s networks in 2010. By targeting engineers through a faked LinkedIn page, GCHQ was able to get deep inside the Internet provider to steal data.

One of Belgacom’s main clients was the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council of member state leaders.

Exactly how member states of the European Union there are 28 of them including the U.K. will react to one of its own member states launching a successful hacking attack against their executive body, remains unknown.

But while members of the Parliament and Commission staff have, over the years, seen the U.S. as one of the greatest threats to the region’s data protection and privacy policies, they should have been looking a little closer to home.

Hackers Force Message on Websites Via US Firm

A U.S. firm that helps connect more than 700 companies with customers through social media says a Syrian group hacked the company’s web address to upload a message to other websites.

Gigya CEO Patrick Salyer outlined what happened in a blog published Thursday.

At around 6:45 a.m. Eastern Time, the company discovered "sporadic failures with access to our service," Salyer wrote.

The executive said hackers had rerouted Internet traffic from Gigya’s website to an outside computer server. That server generated a message to visitors that their site had been hacked by the Syrian Electronic Army.

Published reports noted the message appeared on websites for several UK newspapers, CNBC and the National Hockey League.

The message also showed up briefly on some retail sites just as they prepared for the biggest shopping day of the year on Friday. The National Retail Federation did not immediately comment Thursday.

Still, the issue appeared to be resolved quickly.

The hackers rerouted Gigya’s web traffic by tweaking the company’s web address on Internet registry Whois.com so that it would point visitors to the outside server. The registry entry on Whois.com was fixed about an hour after the company detected the breach, Salyer said.

Even so, the executive sought to reassure the company’s clients.

"To be absolutely clear: Neither Gigya’s platform itself nor any user, administrator or operational data has been compromised and was never at risk of being compromised," he wrote.

The Syrian Electronic Army aligns itself with Syrian President Bashar Assad. It has previously taken credit for hacking media sites like E! Online and the BBC.

Oops: After Threatening Hacker With 440 Years, Prosecutors Settle for a Misdemeanor

Thanks in part to America s ill-defined hacking laws, prosecutors have enormous discretion to determine a hacker defendant s fate. But in one young Texan s case in particular, the Department of Justice stretched prosecutorial overreach to a new extreme: about 440 years too far.

Last week, prosecutors in the Southern District of Texas reached a plea agreement with 28-year-old Fidel Salinas, in which the young hacker with alleged ties to members of Anonymous consented to plead guilty to a misdemeanor count of computer fraud and abuse and pay $10,000 in restitution. The U.S. attorney s office omitted one fact from its press release about that plea, however: Just months ago, Salinas had been charged with not one, but 44 felony counts of computer fraud and cyberstalking crimes that each carry a 10-year maximum sentence, adding up to an absurd total of nearly a half a millennium of prison time.

Virtually all of those charges have now been dismissed entirely. And Salinas s defense attorney Tor Ekeland argues they were piled on based on a faulty reading of computer crime laws, possibly intended to intimidate the young hacker into a unfavorable plea or to damage his reputation.
The more I looked at this, the more it seemed like an archetypal example of the Department of Justice s prosecutorial abuse when it comes to computer crime, Ekeland said in an interview with WIRED. It shows how aggressive they are, and how they seek to destroy your reputation in the press even when the charges are complete, fricking garbage.

Eighteen of the 44 counts in Salinas indictment, for instance, were for cyberstalking an unnamed victim. But each of those charges was based on Salinas merely filling out a public contact form on the victim s website with junk text. Every time he clicked submit had been counted as a separate case of cyberstalking.

It shows how aggressive they are, and how they seek to destroy your reputation in the press even when the charges are complete, fricking garbage. Tor Ekeland

Another 15 counts of violating the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act in Salinas indictment were tied to websites he had targeted in an alleged hacking spree; in some cases he was charged multiple times for different alleged hacking attempts of the same site over the course of just minutes. In each case, Ekeland says, Salinas had merely scanned the sites with commercially available vulnerability scanning tools like Acunetix and Webcruiser.

In his final plea agreement, the only remaining one of those 44 felonies to which Salinas actually pleaded guilty downgraded to a misdemeanor was a computer fraud and abuse charge for repeatedly scanning the Hidalgo County website for vulnerabilities. Prosecutors argued the scans slowed down the site s performance.

Ekeland compares Salinas case to similarly aggressive prosecution in the cases of other young hackers like Andrew Weev Auernheimer and Aaron Swartz. Auernheimer, another of Ekeland s clients, was convicted of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and abuse when he and a friend wrote a script to collect AT&T users personal information that was exposed on a public website. (He was freed on appeal due to jurisdictional issues.) Swartz was accused of illegally downloading journal articles en masse from the website JSTOR, and charged with 11 counts of violating the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. Facing 35 years in potential prison time, he hung himself in his Brooklyn apartment in January of last year.

Texas U.S. attorney s office spokesperson Angela Dodge wrote in an email to WIRED that she wouldn t discuss the specifics of the office s prosecutorial discretion. We believe we secured a plea in this case that will serve as a deterrent to similar crimes and that was in the best interest of justice for all parties involved, Dodge wrote. Not only does he stand convicted, but he will also be providing restitution to Hidalgo County for their losses.

Salinas sentencing is scheduled for February 2nd, and he declined through his lawyers to speak before that date. He now faces a maximum of one year in prison, though Ekeland says he plans to argue that Salinas punishment should be limited to the restitution he s agreed to pay.

 It ran on the front pages of the newspaper down there. His mother cried.

After all, Ekeland argues, Salinas has already been pilloried in the local and national press, which touted the early charges against him, but ignored the fact that they were dropped. They destroyed his reputation, they tried to ruin his life, says Ekeland. It ran on the front pages of the newspaper down there. His mother cried.

Both the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and the cyberstalking law under which Salinas was prosecuted have been criticized for their vagueness. Prosecutors argued the stalking law applied to Salinas case, for instance, because he had caused his victim substantial emotional distress.   If filling a website submission form a lot of times is cyberstalking, about half of Twitter is going to jail, Ekeland says.

But just as importantly, Ekeland points out that prosecutors also applied those laws sloppily. The cyberstalking law, for instance, applies to a course of conduct, he says, meaning that a defendant shouldn t face multiple counts for merely filling out a website s contact form multiple times.

Ekeland, who took Salinas case pro bono, says that the plea agreement demonstrates how over-eager prosecutors have become to prosecute hackers. The CFAA is hot right now. They all want a computer crime prosecution notch on their belt, he says. But they don t understand the law or computers. As soon as they got caught, they folded.

Not every hacker victim of prosecutorial overreach will win the attention of a pro bono lawyer, either. I feel sorry for all the people that don t have the support that Fidel had, says Ekeland. There are a ton of Fidel Salinases out there that aren t as lucky.

EU Lawmakers Urge Regulators To Break Up Google

European Union lawmakers overwhelmingly backed a motion on Thursday urging anti-trust regulators to break up Google, the latest setback for the world’s most popular Internet search engine.

Google has been in the EU’s regulatory sights since 2010, and is also grappling with privacy issues, requests to scrub search results to comply with a court ruling, copyright concerns and tax controversies.

The non-binding resolution in the European Parliament is the strongest public signal yet of Europe’s concern with the growing power of U.S. tech giants. It was passed with 384 votes for and 174 against.

German conservative lawmaker and co-sponsor of the bill Andreas Schwab said it was a political signal to the European Commission, which is tasked with ensuring a level playing field for business across the 28-country bloc.

"Monopolies in whatever market have never been useful, neither for consumers nor for the companies," he said.

Schwab said he had nothing against Google and was a regular user. "I use Google every day," he said.

Google declined to comment. European Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager has said she will review the case and talk to complainants before deciding on the next step.

Her predecessor rejected three attempts by the company to settle complaints that it unfairly demoted rival services and stave off a possible fine of up to $5 billion.

Adding to the pressure on Google, France and Germany called on Thursday for a review of the EU’s competition rules to ensure global Internet companies could successfully be targeted.

They wrote to the Commission asking it to launch a public consultation "to discuss the framework that should be applied to these economic actors, to see if today’s competition rules allow us to target the behaviours of these companies," said Axelle Lemaire, French state secretary for digital affairs.

Lemaire said the two governments wanted to make sure the tax optimisation strategies used by companies to lower their corporate tax rates "are no longer possible".

The Commission is investigating a number of tax deals between companies such as Apple and Amazon and some member states on the grounds they may constitute illegal state aid.

The resolution did not mention Google or any specific search engine, though Google is by far the dominant provider of such services in Europe with an estimated 90 percent market share.

The lawmakers called on the Commission to consider proposals to unbundle search engines from other commercial services.

Some politicians criticised the proposal.

"Parliament should not be engaging in anti-Google resolutions, inspired by a heavy lobby of Google competitors or by anti-free market ideology, but ensure fair competition and consumer choice," said lawmaker Sophie in’t Veld from the Parliament’s ALDE liberal group.

Google is the target of a four-year investigation by the Commission, triggered by complaints from Microsoft, Expedia, European publishers and others.

Lobbying group Computer & Communications Industry Association, whose

members include Google, eBay Facebook, Microsoft and Samsung, said unbundling was an "extreme and unworkable" solution that made no sense in rapidly changing online markets.

"While clearly targeting Google, the parliament is in fact suggesting all search companies, or online companies with a search facility, may need to be separated. This is of great concern as we try to create a digital single market," it said.

Apple Could Drop Google For Bing In Safari

Apple is rumored to be dropping rival Google as the main search engine for Safari. The partnership is set to end early next year, and it is reported Apple will either go with another search engine or perhaps launch its own.

Reports of Apple potentially developing a search engine is nothing new. Four years ago, Piper Jaffray analysts predicted the Cupertino-based tech giant would eventually launch a mobile search engine by 2015. Earlier this month, Apple Insider reported a web-crawling bot was found in Apple’s servers. This could be the start of a new search engine or it could be just a way to boost search options. One example of this is when OS X Yosemite Search Spotlight scours through desktop, web, Wikipedia and maps.

It’s reported Microsoft’s Bing and Yahoo are already in talks with Apple about becoming the main search engine for Mac and iOS devices. Right now it appears Microsoft has the upper hand because Bing is already used for Spotlight and Siri. But back in 2013, Yahoo was reportedly working to increase revenues and aim to become Apple’s default search.

Firefox recently dropped Google as the default search engine and replaced it with Yahoo. Both moves could further inspire other companies to drop Google’s search engine from their websites or applications.

Apple has always switched up providers for programs. With the iOS 7 launched, Siri’s default engine was Bing. With iOS 8, Apple replaced Yahoo’s Weather with The Weather Channel. Apple even dropped Google Maps in favor of its own Maps. There is a strong possibility Apple could go with another search engine but it is just as likely it could launch its own search service. The latter could be a huge blow to rival Google as it remains one of the leading search engines around the world.

16 Webcam Hijacking Suspects Arrested in Wake of Bedroom-peeping

An international bust of people illegally using remote-access Trojans (RATs) to hijack people’s webcams last week led to the arrest of 16 people across Europe.

The UK National Crime Agency said on Friday that five people had been arrested in the UK, and another man was brought in for voluntary questioning.

The list of those targeted in the UK:

Two 33-year-old men and a 30-year-old woman arrested in Leeds.
A 20-year-old man arrested in Chatham, Kent.
A 40-year-old, arrested in Darlington, whose gender wasn't disclosed.
A search warrant was also executed on a 19-year-old man from Liverpool who was brought in for voluntary questioning.
Another 11 people were arrested in Estonia, France, Romania, Latvia, Italy, and Norway.

RATs let crooks gain complete control over targeted computers anywhere in the world, enabling them to turn victims' webcams on and off, to access banking or other personal information, to download new and potentially illegal content, or to use the victim's computer to commit additional crimes, such as being a zombie computer in distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks.

Victims are typically infected when they fall for a rigged email, clicking on a link purporting to be a picture or video or disguised as a legitimate file, but which is in reality an installer for the RAT.

The Trojans quietly, insidiously slip onto victims' computers, often leaving no clue that a machine is infected.

The international bust comes in the wake of recent news about a site - Insecam - that appeared to be based in Russia and which was until recently showcasing feeds from webcams secured with default passwords.

On Thursday, the UK privacy regulator, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), warned about Insecam.

Information commissioner Christopher Graham urged Russian authorities to take immediate action to take down the site.

Graham said that in addition to taking part in the international effort to close down the Russian site - which was streaming live feeds from baby monitors, bedrooms, gymnasiums and gym CCTV - he also would be working with the US's Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to try to force the site to close if the Russian authorities failed to cooperate.

Graham said in an interview with BBC Radio 4's Today that it's imperative for people to secure their webcams, which are often installed with default passwords that are easy for crooks to guess:

I m very concerned about what this [website] shows and I want the Russians to take this down straight away ... We now want to take very prompt action working with the Federal Trade Commission in the States to get this thing closed down. But the more important thing is to get the message out to consumers to take those security measures. If you don t need remote access to a webcam then switch off that function altogether.

The ICO also published these tips on how to secure webcams by setting hard-to-guess passwords and other steps, including turning off remote viewing if you don't think you're going to use it (an option that normally won't stop you from viewing the footage on your home's Wi-Fi network).

The NCA didn't say if there is any connection between the arrested RATters - who allegedly installed malware to take over webcams and/or commit other remote-access dirty deeds - and Insecam, which seems to have used a different tactic to take over webcams: namely, using tools that crawl the web, looking for unsecured webcams, and who then apparently broke into

those internet-enabled cameras by guessing their easily guessed passwords.

At any rate, as of Sunday, Insecam seemed to be kaput, and whoever was running the site seems to be looking for a job.

Each tab on the site, which previously led to various categories of webcams, has now been appended with "No".

No World CCTV cameras online, No AvTech DVRs, No Foscam cameras, etc.

Instead, each tab led to the same request, for a "good remote job" for a programmer with skills in Linux, FreeBSD, C/C++, Python, and MySQL.

At this point, with the way things are going with webcam hijackers, Mr or Ms Insecam might have to do that remote work behind bars!

China-made E-Cigarette Chargers Could Infect Your Computer with Virus

It’s better for smokers to quit smoking. Are you using electronic cigarettes (E-cigarettes) instead normal ones?? Still, you should quit your smoking habit, because it not only damages your health, but could pose a danger risk to the health of your computer.

E-cigarettes have become the latest vector for hackers to distribute malicious software. E-cigarettes manufactured in China are reportedly being used to spread malware via a USB port to computers when users plug in for charging it up.

The report broke when an executive at a "large corporation" had been infected with malware from an undetermined source after he quit smoking and switched to e-cigarettes made in China, detailed a recent post to social news forum Reddit.

Further investigating the matter, he found that the chargers of the e-cigarettes - bought from the online auction site eBay for $5 - are hard-coded with the malware that infected his workstation despite having latest virus and anti malware programs installed.

"The executive’s system was patched up to date, had antivirus and anti-malware protection," Reddit user Jrockilla said. "Web logs were scoured and all attempts made to identify the source of the infection but to no avail."

"Finally after all traditional means of infection were covered, IT started looking into other possibilities. They finally asked the executive: ’Have there been any changes in your life recently?’ The executive answered: ’Well yes, I quit smoking two weeks ago and switched to e-cigarettes.’ And that was the answer they were looking for."

Rik Ferguson, a security consultant for Trend Micro, also considers the matter plausible and says, "Production line malware has been around for a few years, infecting photo frames, MP3 players and more." In 2008, for instance, a photo frame produced by Samsung shipped with malware on the product’s install disc, the Guardian reported.

"Hackers are able to exploit any electronic device to serve malware to a poorly protected network," Pierluigi Paganini, chief information security

officer at ID management firm, said in a blog post. "Despite the [fact the] idea could appear hilarious, many electronic cigarettes can be charged over USB using a special cable or by inserting one end of the cigarette directly into a USB port."

The idea is similar to the BadUSB, whose source code was released by the researchers last month on the open source code hosting website Github. BadUSB was capable to spread itself by hiding in the firmware meant to control the ways in which USB devices connect to computers. Ferguson explained that "a very strong case can be made for enterprises disabling USB ports, or at least using device management to allow only authorised devices."

Tumblr Now Fastest-Growing Social Network; Facebook Huge, But Lagging

Facebook is still the world's top social network, but that's not to say that younger upstarts aren't attracting a big chunk of attention themselves.

Facebook is a bit like the whale of the social networking world. It's huge, but it's lumbering along at a much slower growth rate than competing services. Or, at least, somewhat-competing services we wouldn't go so far as to say that Pinterest is directly in Facebook's crosshairs, or vice versa.

So, what's hot in the social networking world? Tumblr, apparently. According to the latest statistics from Globalwebindex, what the research firm defines as Tumblr's active user base grew a whopping 120 percent over the past six months. That's quite a bit more than Facebook's six-percent growth, and just surpassing Pinterest's 111% growth rate to take top honors among the major social networks.

Globalwebindex conducted its research by surveying 41,823 adults in the third quarter of this year using an online questionnaire. Stratified sampling techniques were used to ensure that the queried population was "representative of the Internet population aged 16 to 64 in each country." As you might expect, social media engagement was defined in three different ways: those who own accounts, those who visit the social networks using any device, and those who actively contribute to the social networks on any device.

"Despite its active user number having grown by just 2% since the start of 2014, Facebook is still the number one global network and by an appreciable distance," reads Globalwebindex's report.

"Outside of China, 4 in 5 internet users have a Facebook account a figure which peaks in LatAm at 93%. What's more, 1 in 2 say they are actively using Facebook each month, giving it about twice as many active users as the three sites which compete for second position: Twitter, YouTube and Google+. More than half of Facebook's active users are also logging in multiple times per day, a figure which is higher than the equivalent for any other network."

That said, Facebook was also the only social network that saw a drop in use among those aged 16-24 in 2014. A "very small one," notes Globalwebindex, but one that "needs to be viewed in the context of all other networks posting substantial increases among this demographic."

According to the firm’s questionnaire, Tumblr and Instagram both have the youngest user bases more than 70 percent are between the ages of 16 and 34. Facebook, in contrast, has the oldest user base, with one-fourth of its users aged 45 years or more.

"Social behaviors are diversifying, with people turning to a range of different platforms to carry out different activities. Smaller networks like Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr are thus rising into the mainstream, while bigger players like Facebook are being used more passively," reads the report.

"For most brands, having a presence on just one social network is no longer sufficient. And while Facebook is still the clear number one, it’s no longer the catch-all site it once was; in certain countries, and among certain demographics, other services now represent just as effective touchpoints in terms of reaching particular audiences."

Facebook Updating Its Terms of Use and Privacy Policies

Facebook is notifying its users about an imminent update of its terms of use and privacy policies. The updates will be implemented by Facebook with effect from January 1, 2015.

The updated terms and policies can be read by Facebook users by clicking through the notification message. Users who continue using Facebook after the mentioned date would reflect their acceptance of the social network’s new terms and policies.

At the first glance, the new terms and policies give the users the impression that Facebook is paying heed to the feedback it receives from them. The social network is offering a new ’Privacy Basics’ section which will apparently enable the users to understand and control their privacy settings on the site.

The ’Privacy Basics’ section on the Facebook site chiefly deals with untagging, unfriending, blocking, reminders for public posts, a privacy checkup tool, and simplified audience selectors.

In addition, under the heading ’Helping you get more out of Facebook,’ the social network has explained how its apps work together. This section also includes information about testing optional features like Nearby Friends, as well as a new Buy button.

With some other sections also included in the updated terms and policies, one of the biggest concerns with regard to the changes being implemented by Facebook is the wording that the users will "see improved ads based on apps and sites you use."

HP Stream 11: A $200 Windows Laptop Meant To Be A Chromebook Killer

It’s no secret that people like Chromebooks. That can’t be good news for Microsoft, which used to own the market for cheap computers. Not one to take this sort of encroachment lying down, Microsoft came out with a

lower-cost version of Windows 8.1 that PC makers could use to build small, lightweight devices inexpensive enough to take on Chromebooks. The HP Stream 11 is among the first of these so-called Chromebook killers: an 11.6-inch laptop running full Windows and priced at just $200. For the money, it looks and performs like a netbook, with a colorful plastic shell and an Intel Celeron processor chugging away under the hood. Then again, though, you also have the option of installing traditional desktop apps, which you can't do on a Chromebook, and Microsoft is further sweetening the deal by throwing in a terabyte of OneDrive storage and a yearlong subscription to Office 365. So is this just netbooks, redux? Or does an aggressive price make all the difference?

Stream 11 Pros:

Low price
Bright, playful design
Comfortable keyboard
$25 Windows Store gift card included
Includes 1TB of cloud storage and a one-year Office 365 subscription
Cons
So-so display
Slow boot-up times
Touchpad could use some fine-tuning

At $200, the Stream 11 is a good deal, especially compared to pricier Chromebooks, but beware that it comes with many of the same trade-offs as other budget laptops, including a low-quality display and slow boot-up time.

Hardware

I meant it when I said the Stream 11 looks like a netbook: It's a small, fanless machine, weighing 2.74 pounds, with a plain plastic shell. But damn if it isn't one of the more stylish netbooks I've seen. Available in either magenta or the cobalt blue you see in the above photos, the Stream has a neat fade-out effect, with the colors on the keyboard deck getting lighter and lighter as you get toward the touchpad. The keyboard deck also has a subtle dot pattern throughout, creating the illusion of texture on an otherwise smooth machine (it also looks cool, if you ask me). I also like the way the white keyboard contrasts with the colorful interior. Anyway! You're probably sick of hearing me opine about design, but I assume you get the idea: Love or hate the aesthetic here, I think we can all agree this has a more interesting look than most of the other gray boxes you're gonna find at this price.

Around the edges, you'll notice that HP matches Chromebooks spec for spec, offering all the same ports you'd find on a Chrome OS device. This includes two USB connections (one 3.0, one 2.0), a full-sized HDMI socket, a full-sized SD card reader and a combination headphone/mic jack. There's also a Kensington lock slot - a particularly crucial feature for schools that choose to use this in classrooms.

Just like a typical 11-inch Chromebook, the Stream 11 features a 1,366 x 768 non-touch display, complete with a healthy amount of bezel. I've no complaints about the resolution: There's no other machine I know of at this price that also has a full HD display. I do, however, have some quibbles about the actual quality. First off, despite having a matte, anti-glare finish, the viewing angles are fairly narrow, especially from head-on, when you try and dip the lid forward. I've also

noticed that the colors tend to wash out when I crank up the brightness, but if I settle on a more medium setting, everything looks dull and muted. Again, not a shocker at this price, but it is a reminder of the sort of trade-offs you'll be making.

One thing that might surprise you is the audio quality. Even with the speakers located on the bottom side of the notebook, I still enjoyed loud volume with the machine resting in my lap and on flat surfaces. And, thanks to the DTS Studio Sound technology on board, the actual quality was disarmingly good, too. For almost every genre I tried - jazz, orchestral, swing, pop, electronica - tracks came through loud and clear, with minimal tinniness or distortion.

Finally, I was also pleased with the keyboard - as I often am on HP laptops, I might add. Despite the fact that this is a petite, 11.6-inch machine, the keyboard is nearly full-sized, with generous spacing between the buttons and very few undersized keys (the Ctrl and Fn buttons on the far left side are the two major exceptions). Also, because the Stream 11 doesn't claim to be a particularly skinny laptop, HP was able to build in a little extra keyboard travel, making for some springy, tactile button. As for the touchpad, I had an easy time pulling off multitouch gestures, like using two fingers to scroll side to side through the Start Screen, but single-finger tracking was sometimes an issue in desktop mode.

The Stream 11 might be cheap enough to compete with a Chromebook, but that doesn't necessarily mean it performs like one. Though it uses an Intel Celeron N2840 processor similar to what you'll find in many Chrome OS devices, it feels... slower. A cold-boot, for instance, takes 26 seconds, and that's just to get to the lock screen; even after you enter your password, you're looking at another eight seconds or so until the desktop is fully loaded. Most Chromebooks, meanwhile, take well under seven seconds to boot up - maybe 12 on really sluggish models. Either way, a half-minute boot sequence is unheard of on Chrome devices.

Web performance is a mixed bag too: the Stream 11 beats every other Chromebook in the SunSpider benchmark, but it falls far short in other JavaScript tests like Google Octane and Mozilla Kraken. That doesn't bode well, especially since two of its competitors - the Toshiba Chromebook 2 and the entry-level Samsung Chromebook 2 - have the same CPU, RAM allotment and screen resolution.

You might also be excited about being able to use the standard file manager on the Stream 11, but be warned that the poky disk speeds are likely to slow down any file transfers. In the ATTO benchmark, read speeds on the 32GB flash-based disk reached an average high of 168 MB/s. Writes, meanwhile, topped out around 72 MB/s. As for multitasking, I found that the Stream 11 was sometimes slow to load desktop apps like Spotify, though I had no problem zipping through Modern-style programs I downloaded from the Windows Store. At any rate, all of this convinces me that while the performance here isn't bad for the price, the bar is definitely set higher on Windows machines than it is on Chrome devices; you can do more with them, but the performance overhead is also greater than it would be if it were running the Chrome browser as an OS.

You gotta hand it to HP for truth in advertising: The company says the Stream 11's 37Wh battery can last up to eight hours and 15 minutes on a charge and indeed, I logged eight hours and 17 minutes in my usual rundown test. That was with me looping a full HD video, but if you're willing to settle for good ol' standard def, you should expect closer to

nine hours. All told, that’s hardly the longest runtime we’ve seen from a Chromebook-type machine, but it’s still decent, especially when you consider that the Stream 11 keeps pace with bigger machines like the 13-inch Samsung Chromebook 2.

Software

If you were worried that a "lower-cost version of Windows" meant a watered-down version, you can lay those fears to rest right now. This version - "Windows 8.1 with Bing," as it’s called - is, for all intents and purposes, the same version of Windows 8.1 that ships on every other PC. The only difference is that Bing is the pre-set search engine in Internet Explorer. Even then, you can go into the settings and switch the search engine to Google, Yahoo, et cetera; it’s just that Bing needs to be the default option out of the box.

As I said earlier, too, the Stream 11 comes with 1TB of OneDrive storage (free for the first year), along with a one-year subscription to Microsoft Office 365. (Chromebooks come with 100GB of Google Drive space for two years - either way, that’s way more space than most people could possibly need.) As a bonus too, the Stream 11 also comes with a $25 gift card to the Windows Store. Hooray!

In any case, that’s what Microsoft is offering, but HP threw in a few apps of its own too. These include HP Connected Photo, Connected Music and Connected Drive, none of which are as useful as they sound. Connected Photo is basically a glorified Snapfish app: Using pictures from your Snapfish and Facebook accounts, you can order prints or photo gifts using - yep, you guessed it - Snapfish. Connected Music, meanwhile, allows you to connect your TuneIn Radio and Beats Music accounts and create custom playlists. Nothing wrong with that, of course - if you happen to use either of those two services. Given how few streaming services are supported, I’d just as soon steer you toward Windows’ built-in Xbox Music app, which is excellent at both organizing your music collection as well as helping you discover new tracks. Finally, there’s HP Connected Drive, which allows you to access your files on various devices. It’s a well-intentioned idea, but here too, only certain online storage services are supported. Given that, why not just use something with wide cross-platform support? Something like, I don’t know, OneDrive?

Other than that, you’ll also find a few third-party apps, including Amazon, TripAdvisor, Netflix and mysms, which lets you send and receive texts on your phone. The truth is, that’s not a whole lot as far as extraneous programs go, but if you feel strongly about having a clean copy of Windows, you can always buy the Stream 11 through the Microsoft Store, which strips its PCs of any and all bloatware.

The competition

For all the talk about how the Stream 11 is supposed to be a Chromebook killer, there aren’t actually that many Chromebooks to be had for $200. Other than Acer’s entry-level C720 Chromebook ($200), which uses an older Celeron 2955U CPU, everything else starts at around $250. Both the 11-inch Samsung Chromebook 2 and the 13-inch Toshiba Chromebook 2 use the same processor as the Stream 11, and they start at $250 with comparable 1,366 x 768 displays. The 11-inch ASUS C200 also starts at $250, and though it’s a bit slower than even your average Chromebook, it has best-in-class battery life. From there, it only gets more expensive. HP’s own Chromebook 11 costs $280 with a dual-core Exynos 5250 chip and

a higher-quality IPS screen. Dell’s Chromebook 11 starts at $300, while Lenovo’s N20p goes for a relatively pricey $330. For the money, you get a rotating, Yoga-like touchscreen that bends back slightly, but believe me when I say that the flimsy, uncomfortable keyboard is not worth the higher price.

Meanwhile, though the Stream 11 is a rare breed, it’s not the only Windows device you’ll find in this price range. ASUS recently released the EeeBook X205, an 11-inch Windows 8.1 laptop currently going for $180. I haven’t had the chance to review it, unfortunately, so I can’t vouch for its performance, but I can tell you that the Intel Atom processor inside is lower-clocked than on the Stream 11, while battery life is supposedly longer: up to 12 hours, according to ASUS. Similarly, Acer’s Aspire ES1 is priced at $199 and has the same CPU and 2GB of RAM as the Stream 11. I’d suggest you include that in your cross-shopping too, except I haven’t tested this either, so I can’t go so far as to offer a recommendation, per se.

In addition to laptops, you might also consider a cheap tablet. ASUS’ year-old Transformer Book T100, for instance, has seen a price cut, so that it’s now just $250 at Amazon. Now it’s true, the performance won’t be quite as fast as on the Stream 11, but think about what you’re getting here: a 10-inch tablet with nearly 11-hour battery life, and an attachable keyboard in the box. If you think you might want a touchscreen, the T100 is definitely the better pick, though I’d also warn you that the detachable keyboard there is rather cramped; when it comes to typing, the Stream 11 is still the stronger option.

For many people, the fact that Windows laptops can run desktop apps (and work offline!) means they’re inherently better than Chromebooks, regardless of the price. As a bonus, the Stream 11 actually costs less than most Chrome OS devices, which could make it a no-brainer for some shoppers. And there’s definitely something to that: The Stream 11 is a full-fledged Windows machine, but it’s also portable and inexpensive, with a comfortable keyboard, cute design and surprisingly good audio. Oh, and it comes with a $25 Windows Store gift card, which, depending on how you look at it, could knock the price down to $175. Either way, it’s a good deal for the money.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t any trade-offs. The display quality is a step down from most Chromebooks. And although the Stream 11 has similar specs as a Chrome OS device, and costs about the same, there is a noticeable difference in performance: The battery life is shorter than on some competing models, and the boot-up time is slower too. That isn’t necessarily a dealbreaker, but I would encourage anyone considering this to adjust their expectations. Yes, you can do more with a miniature Windows laptop like this, but because of that, you also need more power for it to run smoothly. As it stands, the Stream 11 is usable, but in the way netbooks were usable, which is to say it can be a bit poky. Then again, for $200, you might be able to forgive that.

U.S. Passes E-Label Act To Free Your Gadgets From Ugly Labels

President Obama has signed the E-Label Act into law on Wednesday, which will allow electronics manufacturers to add labels for products using software rather than having to print the labels on hardware. Essentially, with the law, phones and tablets can be made with cleaner designs as

labels and stickers will no longer be needed and the information could instead be found within the phone's software. On BlackBerry devices, the phone's identifying serial number and IMEI information are usually located under the battery once you take off the battery cover.

How Much Do You Know About the Web?

Less than a quarter of Americans know that "the Internet" and "the World Wide Web" are not the same thing.

According to a Pew Research study, American Web users' understanding of online terms, famous faces, and tech history varies: While 82 percent of people are aware that hashtags are widely used on Twitter, only 21 percent could identify Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg.

"Substantial majorities of Internet users are able to correctly answer questions about some common technology platforms and everyday Internet usage terms," senior Pew researcher Aaron Smith said in the report. "On the other hand, relatively few Internet users are familiar with certain concepts that underpin the Internet and other modern technological advances."

Only one-third of people, for example, know that Moore's Law relates to how many transistors can be put on a microchip. More than 65 percent, meanwhile, know that a "wiki" is a tool that allows people to collaboratively modify online content.

While it's easy to assume that the younger generation has technology down pat, you may be surprised to find out that 18- to 29-year-olds often scored similarly to their older counterparts.

Folks across the board (18 to 65-plus) correctly identified Microsoft founder Bill Gates (pictured) more than 80 percent of the time. And questions about net neutrality and privacy policies stumped almost the same amount of people across the board.

"These differences are most pronounced on questions dealing with social media, as well as common Internet usage conventions," Smith said.

Education levels, however, tend to split respondents more clearly. As Smith pointed out, college grads are likely to score relatively high on most Pew Research knowledge quizzes, and this one is no exception.

Compared to Web users who have not attended college, graduates have a great awareness of facts like Twitter's character limit, or the meaning of terms like "URL." They aren't whizzes at everything, though: only 12 percent knew the first widely available graphical Web browser.

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